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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the evolution of sign language's role in education, beginning with the debate over sign language versus oral communication, followed by the debate over American Sign Language (ASL) versus other sign systems. The paper points out that this debate process is hindering the educational experience for thousands of deaf children and further widening the gap between the "hearing world" and the "deaf world" as hearing people try to impose their opinions on those who are deaf. Research is cited showing that deaf children with deaf parents, who used sign language to communicate, scored better in overall educational achievement and social adjustment than deaf children of hearing parents. American Sign Language is not recommended for use with young deaf children, because the native language of most parents of deaf children is English, the majority of teachers are hearing, and ASL is a spatial language with no written format. The system of Signed English is recommended in its place. Newer, more complex sign systems are not recommended because they have become so complex that they hinder rather than assist the learning process. (Includes nine annotated references) (JDD)

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Which Sign Language System Should Be Used With Young Deaf Children?

Marsha Greenwood-Logsdon

For years a battle was waged among educators and parents alike over the use of sign language with young deaf children. Today the debate appears to center around which system of sign language should be utilized. Many deaf adults argue vehemently in behalf of what they consider their native tongue, ASL (Ameslan or American Sign Language). A large number of educators and parents, the majority of these hearing, argue in favor of some system of manual English. After all, its a "hearing world" they say, and English is the prevailing language in our country. A much smaller group of predominantly hearing people believe that the English language should be broken down into grammatical morphemes and a sign designed for each. For example, the word "butterfly" would be broken down into the morphemes "butter" and "fly".

Many values are in conflict in this current debate. Nearly all the deaf adults I have met over the years felt that they were controlled and manipulated by the "hearing world". They see their language, ASL, as the core of their culture, the common bond they all share. And they do not take kindly to having their language broken down and altered by those who are not part of their culture. Since deaf children will eventually

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learn and use ASL as their core language, why then, don't educators use it for instructional purposes? Conversely, if educators intend to teach deaf children utilizing textbooks written in English, shouldn't the sign language system parallel English? And if so, how far do we alter and break down a viable language to fit our purposes?

The major handicap deaf children face is not learning to speak, but the difficulty in learning and using language. Each word must be taught and internalized. And this takes time. Because of the current debate, deaf children are often presented, at one time or another, with three or more signs for the same word. New teachers arriving in a school system bring new signs and when children move to a new area, they often have to learn a whole new system for that school setting. Time that could be spent on subject matter and language development is spent learning to say something they already know in a different way. Ironically, many of my brighter students have found this amusing, comparing how many signs they know for a single word. But for the majority, it's a frustrating experience. They frequently become confused over which sign to use with what marker instead of concentrating on what they were trying to say in the first place.

The current debate, although intellectually stimulating, is hindering the educational experience for thousands of deaf children. In addition, it is further widening the gap between the "hearing world" and the "deaf world". As one of my students

stated, "When are hearing people going to stop messing around with the signs and just let us learn?"

By now I'm sure you have noticed that I use the word "deaf" instead of the currently popular phrase, "hearing-impaired". In recent years "hearing-impaired" has become the socially accepted phrase to describe anyone experiencing any hearing loss necessitating any type od educational or mechanical intervention (hearing aids, FM systems, etc.). This may be a kinder, gentler choice of words and is certainly more acceptable than "deaf mute" or "deaf and dumb". However, for educational purposes, I believe it is ambiguous, confusing, and at times misleading. Two children in a school may be labeled hearing-impaired but require extremely different educational interventions. For example, child A may have a profound hearing loss and was prelingually deafened requiring special placement and instruction, while child B acquired a mild loss, and with hearing aids, functions optimally in a regular class with no special instruction.

I have not been able to locate where or by whom the term "hearing-impaired" was coined. However, I highly suspect that it was invented by a hearing person. I have never met an adult who described himself as "hearing-impaired" although all easily and readily labeled themselves as "deaf" or "hard of hearing". Could this be another example of the paternalistic and manipulative "hearing world"? I have deaf and hard of hearing friends who would answer with an unequivocal, "YES".

Therefore, for the sake of clarity and simplicity, I will continue to use the word "deaf" and will define it as "a person...who cannot hear and understand connected speech, though he may, and generally does, have extensive sound perception." (Brill, Unknown)

Additionally, I find it impossible to address the issues surrounding the current proliferation of sign language systems without examining the circumstances that led to the current debate. After nearly one hundred years of doggedly attempting to educate young deaf children through a combination of speech, lipreading, and audition alone, educators became increasingly uneasy with the results of their labors. Regardless of improvements in teacher training programs and advancements in hearing technology, deaf children continued to graduate from high school with an average reading level of third grade. Less than ten percent attended college; the majority were employed in unskilled, manual labor jobs. (Vernon, 1969)

Perhaps surprisingly, sign language was used in many residential schools, but only with the older "failures". And nearly all deaf children in these schools learned sign language to communicate with each other; however, they were prohibited from using it as a communication tool in the classroom. Some schools took extreme measures to prohibit this by tying children's hands when they attempted to use them to communicate. Parents were admonished that if their young children learned sign language, they were never learn to talk. There was little

objective data to support this claim; emotions, primarily fear, ruled.

The decade of the 1960s saw a growing emergence of scientifically obtained data that appeared to disprove the assumptions of the oral method. Several renowned educators and psychologists compared the language skills, educational achievement, and social adjustment skills of deaf children of deaf parents with deaf children of hearing parents. The results of nearly all studies indicated what I believe most educators had known or suspected for some time. Deaf children of deaf parents scored better in overall educational achievement and exhibited better social adjustment than the deaf children of hearing parents. (Meadow, 1967 and Schlesinger, 1969) Some studies even indicated that speech and lipreading skills actually improved when the children possessed a core vocabulary of signs. (Meadow, 1968) The one constant throughout the research was that the deaf parents used sign language to communicate with their children.

The late 1960s and early 1970s saw classrooms, indeed, entire school systems instituting the use of sign language with their young deaf children. Why, after one hundred years of indoctrination in the oral method, and with only a small amount of contradictory research data, did educators and parents so quickly and easily jump on the band wagon to use sign language? I have come to the conclusion that the research data played a key, but relatively minor role. I believe that there were other

factors, that grouped together, provided the major impetus for changes; the research data merely gave legitimacy to the revolution.

I think it is vitally important to realize that this revolution was occurring amidst the sweeping social and cultural changes that were happening in our society as a whole. Individual as well as societal values and beliefs changed rapidly during the 1960s and early 1970s. Individual differences became a source of pride for many; the necessity for hiding and camouflaging differences was reduced. One could be "special" and "different" with positive connotations. For many, the disreputable language of signs became fashionable. If one signed, he became not only acceptable, but special.

Secondly, it is not surprising that many deaf people aligned themselves with the plight of the blacks in this country. Both groups expressed disapproval of the paternalistic attitude of the white/hearing would and actively pursued equal roles in decision making processes regarding themselves. (Schlesinger, 1969) In fact, the sign for "deaf pride" or "deaf power" followed closely on the heels of the slogan "black power".

We must also consider that one of the primary impetuses for using the oral method was based on the emotion of fear. Proponents of the oral method seldom extolled the benefits of oralism, but instead, insisted that if deaf children learned signs, they would never talk, never acquire language.

And finally, we must remember that large groups of students

in teacher training programs were being trained during this period of social change to meet the needs of the large number of deaf children born as a result of the measles outbreak of 1966. Many of these teachers, myself included, were not emotionally equipped or socially prepared to accept the status quo in the classroom. We wanted our children to learn and we wanted them to learn now.

The time was ripe for change; the people involved were primed for it. I believe the research data merely became the match that lit the fuse of the revolution in deaf education.

And so teachers, especially on the east and west coasts, began using sign language with very young deaf children. At first it was called the simultaneous or combined method, and as I pointed out earlier, it had been in use for many ears with older "failures" of the oral method. But in 1970, Dr. David Denton, of the Maryland School for the Deaf, coined the phrase"total communication" and it became a philosophy of education, not merely a method. In part, that philosophy state that, "Total Communication is the right of every deaf child to use all forms of communication in order that he may have the full opportunity to develop language competence at the earliest possible age." (denton, 1970) To me, it was beautifully phrased and it touched the hearts and minds of many. School system, even states, adopted it as their philosophy for education. Unfortunately, some educators even today do not appear to see the difference between the simultaneous method and

the philosophy of Total Communication and use the terms interchangeably, leading to further confusion and ambiguity in the field.

Of course there were bitter arguments, many tears, and great soul searching on behalf of parents and educators alike. But historically speaking, the revolution was relatively short in duration, which in itself, made a major impact on the current problem.

The large majority of teachers knew little or no sign language. Few teacher training programs acknowledged its viability, much less offered courses in it. So teachers picked up sign vocabulary whenever they could, from whomever they could. Ad of course the vocabulary they were learning was taken form ASL, a language with its own structure. I find it philosophically interesting that I never heard anyone say, "Let's just use ASL in our classrooms". It was taken for granted that we would use English. And there was the crux of he problem, taking one language and modifying and adapting it into another language.

Gallaudet College, and specifically Harry Bornstein, had been experimenting with the addition of morphological markers to basic ASL vocabulary to provide a clearer visual representation of English. For example, markers to indicate verb tenses were formed. The attempt, I believe, was to remain as true as possible to ASL vocabulary while adding markers necessary for English structure.

I think it is important at this point to ask the questions, "Why didn't we just stop here? Why did we pursue further adaptations, modifications and outright inventions?' I believe one the reasons was because there was no book no printed dictionary, where when you needed a word, you could just look it up! Our culture in particular seems to need information in print; we're more apt to believe the printed word than information disseminated in any other way. I know of school systems that eventually adopted a sign system specifically because there was a book.

Secondly, teachers in classrooms were discovering that ASL was a conceptual language, limited in its range of vocabulary. There was a sign for car, but what about bus, truck, van etc.? Its been said that necessity is the mother of invention. A perfect example of this adage occurred in classrooms all over the country. When confronted with situations where signs were needed, teachers frequently just made them up.

In addition, our culture appears to believe we can always improve upon what we already have. We're always seeking a better mousetrap, so to speak. I've often wondered if, as a society, we've ever said, "Let's stop. This is as good as it can possible get. Let's leave it alone." I've never come up with a single example. And so, as with everything else, there were those who sought to improve sign language.

And finally, we need to consider that signs are not only visual, but tactile. Many signs give a visual representation of

objects; they look like the objects the words represent. After seeing the sign for "turtle", for example, you can't imagine any other sing fitting the meaning of the word as well. And when you couple the visual impression with how the sign feels and moves, an emotional attachment is often made. So even when seemingly rational minds attempted to standardize signs in one area of the country, arguments prevailed. (I remember spending each Saturday for a year as a member of the Northern California Sign Language Committee attempting this very task. We frequently spent hours discussing one sign with each of us using every persuasive power we had to convince the others that our sign was "right" and the one that should remain.)

In 1969, a group of parents and educators, deaf and hearing, met in southern California with the goal of establishing a consistent, logical and rational system of signs to represent as closely as possible the basic elements of English. However, the group split due to disagreements over the extent of departure from traditional signs. (Gustason, 1974-75) From that split, three distinct, <u>published</u> systems emerged. The fact that all three were not only published, but published at around the same period of time is crucial in understanding the current problem. The need for a reference book, a dictionary of signs, was so great that teachers and parents often latched onto the first one they could find. A book in hand was better than philosophic intent in the bush. "Here's the sign I need (right now) for _____" had more force than, "Why did they make the

sign for _____ this way?"

All of these forces impacted the current debate. I believe I can have answered some of the interogatives of the problem, the who, what, where, how, and even why of the problem. But the problem remains. Different sign systems continue to be used in different classrooms throughout the country. It will be a rare deaf child who will only need to learn one sign language system during his pre-school, elementary and high school years. The need for standardization is apparent, but which should it be? I'm reluctant to stick my neck out, but will do so anyway. I support the system of Signed English developed at Gallaudet College. I believe it most closely adheres to the spirit and integrity of American Sign Language. Why, then, not ASL itself? I do believe deaf children will and should learn it when they get older.

Louis Fant, a strong proponent of the use of ASL with all deaf children, and the hearing son of deaf parents is, I believe, the most widely read publisher of books on ASL. Several years ago we had the opportunity to debate the use of ASL versus a manually encoded system. Mr. Fant and I agreed that ASL was a legitimate language, and the native language of deaf adults in our country. Neither of us wants it denigrated. Neither of us wants to see this beautiful language corrupted beyond recognition. However, there are three reasons why I did not then, and do not now, believe it can be used effectively with young deaf children.

First, the large majority of deaf children today are born of hearing parents. The need for parents to be able to communicate with their children is paramount. And the native language of most of these parents is English. Most parents have many difficult psycho-social adjustments to make upon learning they have a child who is deaf. Asking them to learn to speak their own language in a new and different way adds to their burdens. To ask them to learn an entirely different language is to invite failure.

Secondly, right or wrong, the majority of teachers are hearing. We think and conceptualize using English as our basis. Some may argue that a teacher of a foreign language is in the same situation, yet teaches using his particular language of expertise. However, the goals are different. The goal of a French teacher is to teach French. For the teacher of the deaf, sign language is not the goal, but a tool, a vehicle toward a goal. "The idea...is to use language as a means to an end, and not as an end in itself. The <u>end</u> is effective education, and <u>means</u> is the teaching or learning of language as early as possible and the subsequent utilization of it as a medium of instruction." (Mitchell, 1982)

And finally, Ameslan is a spatial language and has no written format. Educators teach deaf children utilizing textbooks written in English. Indeed, we judge their educational competence using test materials written in this language. Therefore, since the native tongue of parents and

teachers is English, and children will be educated in this language, it is to me, only logical that any sign system used needs to parallel English.

With that in mind, why do I not support the newer, more complex sign systems? From an intellectual standpoint I find them rational and sound. In fact, "students exposed to SEE-2 for academic purposes and who also had little experience with deaf adults are able to comprehend ASL used to convey informal conversations." (Luetke-Stahlman, 1990) My concerns are philosophical and practical in nature. My first question is, "Are they really necessary?" Do we really need to break down a word like "butterfly" into "butter" and "fly"? I do not think so. Hearing children are not required to first learn the words "butter" and "fly" as separate morphemes combined to make a word that names an insect. They learn the insect's name as a conceptual whole, a "butterfly". And who has the right to decree that this sign, which has always meant "should" will now mean "shall"?

I also believe that some educators and proponents of the new systems are forgetting one of the basic reasons for using sign language with deaf children in the first place, which was to facilitate the learning process. There comes a point when a tool becomes so complex, that for the majority, it hinders instead of assists. Some deaf children can and do learn these complex systems. But I have come to the conclusion, that for the majority, the complexity actually hinders their ability to

learn instead of facilitates it. In addition, it is these complex systems that deaf adults object to most strongly. They see core vocabulary changed arbitrarily with little or no input from the deaf themselves.

Historically speaking, the revolution to use sign language with young deaf children happened seemingly overnight amidst sweeping social and cultural changes. It will take decades to evaluate the results of our good intentions. Hopefully, there will come a time when a sense of compromise will unite with scientifically obtained data resulting in one uniform sign system for use with young deaf children. Do I think that time will come? Yes, I do, though possibly not in my life time. My main reason for believing so is that I see more and more educators speaking of working "with" the deaf instead of "for" the deaf. Those are small words, but they carry great promise. Unfortunately, until that time comes, deaf children will continue to spend valuable educational time learning three to four signs for a single word.

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